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Comparative Communist Politics: Towards the Second Generation

Leslie Holmes, *Politics in the Communist World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

Comparative communist politics appears to be entering a new and fruitful generation of research and publication. The first generation—one thinks of books such as Ionescu's *Politics of the European Communist States* (1967) and Gripp's *Political System of Communism* (1973)—dealt for the most part with the "established" communist systems in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and often (although not in these particular cases) adopted a country-by-country approach with only an introduction and conclusion which gallantly attempted to put forward some cross-system generalizations. The Soviet model was accorded almost exclusive authority; relatively little attention was paid to politics in relation to the wider society as compared to politics within the government machine; and the approach was often speculative or Kremlinological rather than empirically grounded on statistics, documents or other more reputable sources. Despite the enduring insights of some of this literature it is not perhaps entirely surprising that little of it has survived into the 1970s and 1980s.

More recent studies—let us call them the second generation—have differed from this earlier work in three main ways. In the first place, they reflect the widening of the geographical boundaries of communism that has taken place since the mid-1970s. Up to that time there was little dispute that regimes which might reasonably be called communist had been established in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, in China, North Korea and North Vietnam, and most recently in Cuba. Since then communist forms of government have established themselves more widely in South-East Asia (Laos, Kampuchea and South Vietnam) as well as in a series of other countries about whose communist credentials there has been less agreement (Afghanistan, Angola, Benin, Ethiopia, Mozambique and some others). In these circumstances it has been difficult to retain the original view that the Soviet model had some sort of primacy; for some scholars, on the contrary, the large adventitious links betwen communism and Soviet rule should now be severed and a version of communism should be embraced in which no single model has any particular authenticity or authority.[1]

1. This position is taken, for instance, in Bogdan Szajkowski's general introduction to the 35-volume series of country studies appearing under his editorship under the title *Marxist Regimes* (London: Pinter, and Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1985 onwards).

A second major change has followed from the substantial improvements in the scholarly resources that are available for the comparative study of communist systems. So far as individual countries are concerned the Soviet Union, secretive even by the standards of communist nations, set the pace for most of the 1980s. Reports began to appear from late 1982, for instance, of the weekly meetings of the Politburo, and there were even reports of meetings of Politburo commissions and of commissions of the Council of Ministers.[2] A set of statistical handbooks began to appear, from the 1960s onwards, dealing with party membership at the republican and then at the regional level.[3] The 1979 census, published in a single volume in the late Brezhnev era, was something of a disappointment. However, under Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* there have been further improvements: data on infant mortality and life expectancy have reappeared in statistical publications, newspapers and other publications have given attention to the "dark sides" of Soviet life such as crime, drug addiction and prostitution, and officials have been more willing to speak openly to Westerners. Other communist countries, although obviously with great variations, have moved in roughly the same direction: in China, for instance, an annual statistical yearbook has been appearing since 1981, and a foreign trade annual since 1982. It was perhaps indicative of this overall change that Paul Shoup, who in the 1960s had pointed to the "prospects for an empirical approach" in the analysis of communist nations, in the early 1980s published a substantial handbook providing a wealth of political and other data on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe for the whole of the post-war period.[4]

A third and final change, and not the least important, was conceptual. It reflected a greater theoretical awareness and maturity on the part of students of comparative communism, based in part upon closer links with their parent disciplines such as comparative politics and comparative economics. It would, of course, be quite wrong to ignore the shortcomings of which many scholars began to speak in the late 1960s and 1970s as the ambitious conceptual frameworks of earlier years began to reveal their limitations (one thinks, for instance, of the series of studies in political development sponsored by the Committee on Comparative Politics of the US Social Science Research Council). The feeling of "crisis," however, was felt more strongly in the parent disciplines than in communist studies themselves, perhaps in part because they were more firmly grounded on the empirical realities of the countries with which they were concerned. The 1970s and 1980s, in fact, saw significant advances in many areas. Studies of historical development included re-examinations of Stalinism, of the "friends and foes" of political change, and of patterns of development spanning the late Tsarist as well as Soviet periods.[5] Studies of communist political culture developed rapidly although not without controversy.[6] The first comparatively-oriented studies of political

2. See Stephen White, "Soviet politics since Brezhnev," *Journal of Communist Studies*, 1, no. 2 (June 1985), p. 130 no. 50.

3. A review of some of these sources is available in A. A. Prutskii, "Partiinaya zhizn': tsifry i fakty," *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, no. 5, 1984, pp. 72–82.

4. Paul S. Shoup, comp., *The Eastern Europe and Soviet Data Handbook: Political, Social and Developmental Indicators, 1945–1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

5. See for instance Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism* (New York: Norton, 1977); Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and for a representative example, Dorothy Atkinson, *The End of the Russian Land Commune 1905–1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983).

6. See Archie Brown and Jack Gray, eds., *Political Culture and Political Change in Communist States* (London: Macmillan, 1977) and Archie Brown, ed., *Political Culture and Communist Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

participation began to appear.[7] Comparative legal studies registered important advances, particularly at the universities of Leiden and London.[8] Studies of the role of groups in the political process made comparable progress.[9] In sum, a comparative politics of communism had developed by the late 1970s and early 1980s which was more broadly based, empirically better founded and theoretically more sophisticated than had been true a decade or so earlier.

Several texts are now available which reflect these various advances and present them in a form suitable for undergraduate instruction. One of the first was *Communist Political Systems: An Introduction* by Stephen White, John Gardner and George Schöpflin (the second edition, published in 1987, is reviewed on pp. 213–218 in this issue). Other texts included collections of country chapters by a variety of authors (*Communism in Eastern Europe* (2nd edn., 1984), edited by Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, was one of the best of these) or single-author surveys dealing on a country-by-country basis with all or a number of the generally recognized communist regimes (Robert Furtak's *Political Systems of the Socialist States* (1986) was again a good example). Important comparative work, with more forthcoming, has begun to do justice to the nuances of politics in Eastern Europe (see for instance Ivan Volgyes's *Politics in Eastern Europe* (1986)). It nonetheless remains true, as Leslie Holmes remarks in the preface to his new volume, that there have so far been very few single-author studies that have attempted to deal comprehensively with the comparative politics of the major communist nations. His new book is a major and welcome step in that direction.

Holmes defines a communist system relatively broadly, as one in which there should be a commitment to the building of socialism and later communism, a Marxist-Leninist ideology and a political system organized on the basis of democratic centralism. This produces a list of 23 countries which are then examined comparatively and at some length (the book consists of over 450 printed pages and probably over 220,000 words of text). After an initial examination of "what is communism?" Holmes moves on to consider the manner in which communist regimes have obtained and maintained their power. He then considers the forms of legitimate politics, followed by a discussion of illegitimate politics (dissent and mass unrest). Two concluding chapters deal with relations among the communist nations, and with models and interpretations of communist politics. Holmes accepts that a broad survey of this kind "will necessarily be superficial," but his wide reading and first-hand acquaintance with several of these countries (particularly the USSR and the GDR) keep this to a minimum. In fact, his volume has several important and praiseworthy features.

The first of these is probably comprehensiveness. Given the space at his disposal, Holmes can range fairly widely and he finds room not only for the basic elements of his subject but also for (for instance) minor parties, ethnic politics and the dynamics of leadership change. The treatment is comparative throughout, rather than country-by-country, and the writing is clear and straightforward if sometimes, perhaps, a little too detailed and descriptive for its intended purposes. No prior assumptions are made with regard to knowledge of communism or of political science, and there are numerous

7. Donald E. Shulz and Jan S. Adams, eds., *Political Participation in Communist Systems* (New York: Pergamon, 1981).

8. The work of the Documentation Office for East European Law at Leiden appears in the *Review of Socialist Law* and the monograph series *Law in Eastern Europe*; the work of the Centre for the Comparative Study of Socialist Law at London University is now appearing in a regular *Yearbook*.

9. Gordon Skilling has reviewed the progress of such work in his "Interest groups and communist politics revisited," *World Politics*, 36, no. 1 (October 1983), pp. 1–27.

check-lists and summaries which less advanced students will find helpful, (Americans, if not others, may perhaps expect more in terms of charts, tables, diagrams and other kinds of graphic material). It is difficult to find an important part of the subject which is not discussed, normally at length and with some discrimination, and for those who require further information each chapter concludes with a well-chosen list of recommended reading.

Everyone, of course, is likely to want something different from a textbook of this kind, and this reader at least felt that some aspects of comparative communism might have been explored at greater length in such a study. Given the importance he attaches to the official ideology, for instance, it might have been appropriate to devote rather less attention to Eurocommunism (which after all is not the official ideology of any ruling party) and to give rather more attention to Cuban political theory (Castro and Guevara) and Yugoslav political theory (Kardelj and others). The distinctive Yugoslav experience of self-management in both the political and economic spheres indeed receives rather less attention overall than might properly be thought to be its due. The discussion of the role of groups and the policy process is rather too brief, at least if the burgeoning literature on this subject is any guide. The economy and the mass media are largely ignored; and there is no direct discussion of the nature and direction of political change, which gives the discussion a somewhat "static" flavour.

In a book published in 1986, moreover, it may not be unreasonable to expect a little more attention to be paid to fairly recent developments. Gorbachev, for instance, is mentioned, but there is no reference to some of the major policy thrusts of the post-Brezhnev period such as the emphasis on *glasnost* and the extension of workplace democracy. The 1985 Hungarian elections, probably the most remarkable yet seen in a communist country, presumably took place too late to be included, although the 1983 legislation which made provision for them is duly noted. No account appears to have been taken of the Polish legislation which required (from 1984 onwards) at least two candidates to contest each seat available in local and national elections. Although the general level of accuracy is high, there are also some minor errors. For instance, *edinolichie* has been confused with *edinonachalie* (one-man management) in the Soviet Union (p. 180); the Polish paper is *Trybuna*, not *Tribuna Ludu* (p. 303); and Parvus's initials (p. 10) are A. I. rather than N. No-one, however, not even a copy editor, could suggest that there are major inaccuracies.

In the end, all books of this kind must be judged not by minor slips, and what must necessarily be personal choices of emphasis, but by the clarity and insight with which the main elements of the subject are expounded. Judged in this way, *Politics in the Communist World* must be accounted a notable success: it is broadly conceived, more comprehensive than other studies of this kind, and generally clear and accurate. If, as I began by suggesting, comparative communist politics is now entering a second generation, Holmes's study may reasonably be considered to be among the very best of its current representatives.